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THE DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT APOCALYPSE

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"Whence comes it, that the knowledge, that might advance us, the thought that might save us, is transferred from one generation to another, as barren and dead as a stone, till some one seizes it and strikes it into fire."—Harnack.

The "Revelation of Jesus Christ" opens with the declared will and purpose of God, that it be shown to his servants. Where is he who claims that this purpose has been carried out in his own experience?

The *New Century Bible Commentary* says: "The problem of the Apocalypse, which has come down to us from the earliest times, still waits for a solution." The *Hastings Bible Dictionary* says: "Though we find evidence of a general order in the book, which the artistic structure, which the chaps. i-iii prepare us to look for, we must take various departures from any strict order if we would understand the spirit of the writer . . . the effort to bring consistency out of the book by analysis and the reconstruction of sources, out of which it was gradually and unskilfully put together, fails to do justice to the unity of style, and even of plan, which the book has been found to exhibit. This effort has been made by many able men, and according to the prevailing opinion of scholars, has failed."

May not our failure have come from not following Aristotle's teaching to "ask the right question."

The Sealed Book in the Hands of God

The exclusive possession of the book by God alone, being held in his right hand, and closely sealed with seven seals against all eyes, warns us of a most painstaking purpose. The prize was unapproachable, and a mighty angel came forth, and in a great voice propounds the question, "Who is able to take the book, and to loose the seals thereof?"

These were moments of great stress, and John says: "I wept much because no one in heaven nor on the earth, nor under the earth was able to take the book, and to loose the seals thereof." John's anxiety was relieved by the voice of one of the elders, saying to him, "Weep not, behold the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David hath prevailed to take the book, and to loose the seals thereof" because he is found worthy. "Because" is John's key word, used by him a hundred and forty times.

The circumstances and ceremony of its conveyance to Christ added to its exclusive possession by the Almighty, and the very ground and reason being assigned for his being able, touches that strain of spiritual sequence in the divine order which pervades the book and gives it a coherence and synthetic

formation of the very highest order. The cause of John's much weeping has a larger emotional expression in the joy of the sentient worlds that gaze when the lamb takes the book to open its seals. In this ovation over his taking the book the elders about the throne cast their crowns of gold at his feet; they strike their harps and pour out their vials of incense, and "sing the new song" with the ten thousand times ten thousand saints, saying, "Worthy is the lamb to take the book, and to loose the seals thereof because he has washed us in his own blood."

Yet, when the seals are all opened we are shocked with the lack of continuity. Our expectation to see it given directly to John is disappointed because the declared will and purpose of God in the first verse of the Revelation is that it should be signified "to his servant John," who was commanded to write in a book and to send it to the churches, as the "testimony of Jesus Christ, which is the spirit of prophecy." Now, this book of the Almighty, having been committed exclusively to Christ, is to have a second conveyance exclusively to John, and through him to be sent to the churches.

The Interruption in the Narrative concerning the Book a Reference to Apostolic History

It is here we meet with a break in the narrative, and the book is dropped from sight. John says: "I saw the seven angels which stand before God, and there was given unto them seven trumpets." It is at the moment when the stress of anxiety to see the book given to John would naturally increase that an interjected program interrupts

the narration by a series of acts seemingly unrelated to the conveyance of the book to John: only seemingly so, for it is one of these angels who is to receive the book from Christ's own hand, even as Christ received it from the Father's hand.

Now, let us follow these angels. They are given trumpets, which they are to sound, even as Christ said to his apostles, that they should sound from the housetops the secrets which he gave them in the ear; but, charged with this duty, implied in the bestowment of the trumpets, instead of going forward, as the urgency of the case would seem to demand, they turn aside to a special service in which another is added to their number (Rev., chap. 8:2-5). This affair being ended, we again look for these angels with trumpets to proceed to their work, but instead there is another hitch. They tarry and wait to "prepare themselves," and having prepared themselves, they now proceed and go forward in order, as from a common preparation, interrupted by other very significant facts, as happened in reality to the apostles awaiting the day of Pentecost, and the events thereafter (John 7:39). We come, in the sixth trumpet, to a part so significant, so characteristic of the call and mission of Paul, as to make certain that apostle is in view. He receives a direct personal call from the golden altar, and is ordered to a specific duty, which has to do with the four angels that are said to be "bound in the great river Euphrates," to loose them and set them free. It is after this new addition to the seven angels, that is, after Paul, that we see the book bestowed upon John, but

entirely unattended by any demonstration of praise such as attended its conveyance to Christ.

We are now in the tenth chapter, where we find our own John, "your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, in the isle of Patmos, an exile for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ," which he does not till now receive. It is here in connection with these trumpet angels that we find him receiving the book and beginning to write. Here we begin to get our feet upon the earth, for John is the only living personality mentioned in the entire book, and he is at pains to tell us five times that he is John.

Now the first question is: Why did not Christ give the book to John at once, when he had loosed the seals? Or in other words: Why do these seven angels intrude their presence into the account in this place, by a series of acts unrelated to the central narrative? The answer involves this other question: What does it mean that John is acting his parts among these angels with trumpets?

The answer is simply that these angels or messengers are the apostles, and John takes his place following Paul chronologically, but with a higher and later message. Christ had explained to John that these seven angels are the seven messengers to the churches. They are the apostles and the ground and reason for their waiting was that the spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Questions for the Interpreter

Specifically, then, we have the following questions and answers:

1. What is the ground and reason for the intrusion of the seven angels standing before God to receive their trumpets, and their program before the book is conveyed to John? The answer is, because Jesus was not yet glorified, and the testimony, which the apostles were to sound abroad with trumpets, could not be begun till they had received the Holy Spirit.

2. Why, after they have received their trumpets, do not these angels, under all the stress and urgency, proceed at once to their task, turning aside to receive a new member in a prayer service? Because, while they waited for the Spirit, they selected Matthias, a new apostle, to take the place of Judas.

3. Having this addition to their number, why do not the trumpeters now proceed to their office without further delay? Because Jesus was not yet glorified, and they still waited for the promise of the Spirit.

4. What is the meaning of "they prepared themselves to sound"? It was because they continued in unceasing prayers, till the Spirit had come and sat upon their heads like tongues of fire.

5. Where, or to whom were the messengers to sound their trumpets? They were to begin at Jerusalem, and they sealed men, Jews, out of all nations, who belong to the twelve tribes of Israel.

6. Why was it that the sixth messenger did not receive the common preparation of the other messengers, but got a direct, personal call from the golden altar, from Christ himself, and was sent to do a specific work, that

ended in the whole world being turned loose to make war? Because so was the call of Paul to the ministry and his work.

7. Why does the giving of the book to John come after the sixth trumpet? Because John's great office, as scribe, followed that of Paul, and he received the book in his own historic place, under the order of the Spirit.

8. Why is it that Christ seems to come to John a second time in chap. 10 as he did in chap. 1? Because we mistook a man and his shadow for two men. The first chapter is John's historic account of the circumstances of the vision, while the tenth chapter is a dramatic setting of John's office and place in relation to those of the other apostles, who were silenced in death.

9. Why is it that, when the book is transmitted to John to be shown to the servants of God, it seems to slip away from us, and be lost to sight, and has so remained a silent book ever since? Because, according to its own prophecy, it was to be killed by the beast that cometh up out of the pit of the abyss, and afterward the breath of life from God was to enter into it, and it was to ascend, and to be seen in the ark of God, and it is here that the second

great ovation is given in proclaiming "the kingdom of men has become the kingdom of God."

These few questions and answers are intended as a sort of cross-sectional view of the interior, so to speak, and are a part only of a much longer list which belongs to this system of interpretation. They are so related and connected that the true answer to any one of them involves the principle that explains them all.

The order of the book is read dramatically, and is not amenable to literary "analysis, and the reconstruction of sources" after the manner of the critics. Our gospel history is the ground-work of the vision, but is interwoven with the future as prophecy. The history is as a tree that is covered with the foliage and fruit, so that the things thou sawest, and "the things that are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter, are expressed in one grand synthesis, but in that perfect order of the Spirit of God that was given to his Son, and through him, to John, his servant, who has come to his own time at the end of the silent centuries while his testimony lay dead and unburied 'in sackcloth.'"